

Teaching with the Museum: partnership as pedagogy

Laura M. Holzman

During a public health crisis in which teachers are revising face-to-face courses for virtual formats and museums are closed to visitors, it feels odd to be writing about teaching art history in museum spaces and in partnership with museum staff. This essay is based on a talk I gave in February as part of a CAA session on teaching across museum and university contexts. The distance between then and now can be summed up by this: When I arrived in Chicago for the conference, the new coronavirus had only just been named “COVID-19.” While this essay probably won’t solve your immediate teaching needs, it does offer an opportunity to consider the value of connecting – something that may feel especially meaningful in this moment of necessary physical distancing.

As a professor and public scholar with a joint appointment in an art history program and a museum studies program, my teaching moves fluidly between museum and university settings. Nearly every course I teach includes museum site visits, conversations with museum staff members, or applied projects that involve collaboration with museum stakeholders and sometimes even co-creation with them. Drawing from the philosophy and practice of community engagement that guides the Museum Studies Program at IUPUI, I have come to think of our local museums – including their staff, their collections, their spaces, and their programs – as partners in my teaching. When the museum is truly a partner, it is not simply a resource to be used. Instead, we have a relationship in which participants from the university and the museum are accountable to one another: we share the process and power of meaning-making and we work together in ways that are mutually beneficial.

In my world it’s common to think about partnerships like these as foundational elements for innovative applied projects that involve substantial commitments from museum and university participants. But those kinds of commitments and the projects that can emerge from them aren’t always feasible. Institutional structures, professional expectations, time, geography, and other factors can make community-engaged teaching and learning tricky. Even in cases where more extensive collaborations are not an option, however, partnerships can be highly valuable. They can make conventional, fairly straightforward classroom projects more meaningful, as was the case in an art history course I taught while working closely with the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) at Newfields.

I periodically teach an advanced undergraduate seminar called “Museums, Architecture, and the Politics of Space.” The course examines how museum buildings and their grounds reflect

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mission, shape visitor experience, and shed light on the complex relationships between a museum and the communities it serves or alienates. The learning objectives involve building research skills as well as outcomes specific to the subject matter. In addition to studying material from a range of geographic and historical contexts, students participate in a semester-long research project focused on the IMA, a local museum that is also in the midst of changing the function and appearance of its building and grounds. By working with colleagues at the IMA to develop and implement this research project, we created a learning opportunity for my students that supported the course goals while also serving the museum.

When I began to develop the research component of the course I reached out to Alba Fernandez-Keys, Head of the Library and Archives at the IMA, and archivist Sami Norling. (The second time I taught the class Sami was in a different role at the museum and archivist Lydia Spotts became a key partner instead.) I wanted my students to conduct research in the museum's archives so they could experience first-hand a process that informs so much of the humanities-based scholarship that they read in class and encounter in the world. But I also wanted to build the project in a way that wouldn't create an extra burden for my colleagues at the museum. As we talked through ideas and options, I came to see the assignment as an opportunity to strike a constructive balance between what I could teach my students and what my students could learn directly from the museum's staff and its other resources.

As I developed the assignment guidelines, I worked with Alba, Sami, and, later, Lydia to identify specific aspects of the museum's architectural history and related archival collections that could be the focus of my students' work. This approach allowed us to highlight collections that had been recently processed while also creating a more manageable scope of work for both the Library and Archives staff and my students.

In addition to working with historical documents, students had substantive encounters with museum staff members that demystified the museum and the research process. Alba arranged for the students to talk with members of the museum's architecture and design team who discussed their general professional responsibilities and fielded questions about how they navigated design challenges related to ongoing changes in the museum's use of space. Sami (later Lydia) gave my students a tour of the storage facilities and discussed how the archives are organized, how materials are housed, and how they are used by museum staff and visiting researchers. Back in the study room, she introduced the materials my students would be working with and instructed them on how to handle architectural drawings, photographs, and department files with care. She also walked my students through important logistical matters such as how to make an appointment to visit the library and how to request further materials for study.

We could have structured the project in a way that positioned me as a constant intermediary between my students and the museum. Instead, we shared the teaching responsibilities based on our respective areas of expertise. The Library and Archives team guided the students to sources that would help them answer their research questions while I guided the students through a series of activities to help them analyze and interpret those sources.

The outcomes of this project benefitted the students and the museum. The students gained in-depth experience conducting research and constructing histories that tied our course material to

issues that resonated in our local communities. Close contact with museum staff helped humanize the museum's current and historical actions, which reminded students to be thoughtful and nuanced in their work. For the Library and Archives staff, the project became an example they could point to when advocating for resources to help them process more of the collection and expand their capacity to serve students and other researchers. And, in addition to these more immediate benefits, my colleagues at the IMA Library and Archives and I strengthened our relationship, which may yield more extensive collaborations in the future.